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ABSTRACT

Societal differences among ethnic groups and other geographically remote bodies of peoples within a culture are often caused by dialectal variation. The social and educational implications of societal division by such linguistic differentiation are discussed in this article. The author touches on concepts relating to dialectology, paralanguage, kinesics, and bi-dialectalism. Concluding remarks point out the potential contribution of dialectology and linguistics, particularly in the area of instructional materials development. (RL)

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American Social Dialects[1]

RAVEN I. MCDAVID, JR.

FOR NEARLY THREE THOUSAND YEARS many observers, both lay and professional, have recognized that no speech community lacks the subdivisions that we call DIALECTS. For a century, now, serious students of languages have been collecting systematic information on the dialects of the principal European languages; many of their findings have been published in a series of LINGUISTIC ATLASES and related monographs, of which the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* is one of the most notable examples.[2] Most of these investi-

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Mr. McDavid has served as co-editor of this special issue on linguistics, which he considers the "Mencken issue," exhibiting the increasing interest of the Council in the national idiom.

[2]A good short survey of dialectology is to be found in Chapter 19 of Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York, 1933); a more detailed survey is Séver Pop, *La Dialectologie* (Louvain, 1950). A bibliography of important works in the field down to the New England Atlas is to be found in Hans Kurath, *et al.*, *Handbook of the Linguistic Geography of New England* (Providence, R. I., 1939).

TE 500 319

gations, heretofore, have looked toward the past, toward the historical and cultural forces that have produced these divisions. Now, however—and particularly in the United States—the serious students of dialects are thinking in terms of the future: they see, in an increasingly urbanized society, dialect differences as marking potentially troublesome lines of social division, and they seek to apply their knowledge so as to reconcile the diverging groups and to provide the wider understanding of each other that a mature political community must gain to endure. The experience of dialectologists is reminiscent, in a way, of that of the nuclear physicists two decades ago; long considered impractical dreamers, they suddenly find that they have in their hands awful potentials for the survival or the destruction of their way of life.

That this new emphasis in dialectology should have arisen in the United States reflects both the peculiarities of the American dialectal situation and the consequent new methods that students of dialects have developed to cope with that situation. In most of the European countries there is one prestigious variety of the national tongue, fostered by schools, by mass media of communication, and by tradition: Standard High German, Parisian French, Moscow Russian, Castilian Spanish, Florentine Italian, or British Received Pronunciation (otherwise known as Public School English, since it is systematically imposed on the inmates of such reputable and expensive academies as Eton, Harrow, and Rugby). In these nations, in consequence of the cultural situation, scholars traditionally assume a polar opposition between STANDARD LANGUAGE and DIALECT, and their investigations of dialect show traces of the Wordsworthian syndrome that somehow "humble and rustic life" reveals most purely and accurately the nature of the speech community. In both the German and French atlases, the investigators sought representatives of the "local dialect" as something sharply different from educated French or German, which they assumed to be uniform, and contented themselves with a single representative specimen in each community surveyed. In both of these studies, moreover, the speech of larger communities was ignored in favor of that of country villages. It is true that there was some modification in the Italian atlas directed by Jaberg and Jud, with larger communities included and more than one speaker interrogated in such centers. But the emphasis was largely the same, and it has continued in the recent Linguistic Survey of England. It is really not unfair to state that the conventional European definition of a dialect is a form of the language that an educated man had rather be found dead than speaking.

For many reasons, adequately rehearsed elsewhere, the American situation is quite different from the European one, though it has respectable precedent, notably in classical Hellas before the preëminence of Athens. Even in colonial times there was no single focus for the culture of the colonies; Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, and the Virginia Fall Line ports (Alexandria-Georgetown, Fredericksburg-Falmouth, Richmond and Petersburg) served as centers of a local culture, each with its own standards of prestige and its characteristic forms of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. With the coming of independence and the expansion westward, further local centers arose—Cincinnati, Chicago, New Orleans, St. Louis, Atlanta, Nashville, and San Francisco, for example—each with its own criteria for distinguishing cultivated and uneducated speech. Despite intense rivalries, humorous or otherwise, the cultivated speech of any American community has long been recognized as being as good as that of any other. For this reason, when Hans Kurath organized the American linguistic atlas project in 1929, he could not simply set off

standard speech from dialects and investigate only the latter; he had to assume that standard speech as well as folk speech had local varieties, and that between these two extremes there was an intermediate stage, COMMON OR POPULAR SPEECH—hitherto not studied and often not even assumed in dialect investigations—sometimes closer to the cultivated, sometimes closer to the folk. Thus, instead of the single type of speech represented by a single informant that most European investigators had studied, Kurath insisted on three basic types of informants, with the understanding that a full investigation of the social differences in any community would require a far finer screening than would be feasible for a survey aimed at the entire United States and Canada. Preliminary analyses have not only justified this new procedure but reemphasized the need for many new and intensive studies of specific kinds of communities.[3]

In the postwar period, many specific communities have been investigated.[4] As these investigations have proceeded, accompanied by studies of popular reactions to linguistic variants, scholars have likewise seen the need for amplifying both the range and the intensity of investigations. Syntactic evidence is notably difficult to get by direct interviewing; yet syntax is that part of language with the greatest potential significance for the teacher of English. The role in language of such suprasegmental features as stress, pitch, transition, and terminals has been redefined; it is clear that such features—as well as vowels, consonants, grammatical forms, phrase structures and vocabulary—probably have significant regional and social variants, but investigators have had difficulty obtaining minimal contrasts in natural situations. As promising, and as difficult to handle, are the variations in PARALANGUAGE (non-significant modulations of the stream of speech, such as drawl, clipping, nasality, rasp, abnormal loudness or softness, abnormally high or low pitch, and the like), and in KINESICS, the study of gestures and other bodily movements. Although these features are not represented in writing (save in suggestions by the writer), they are important in face-to-face communication, but their regional and social variants are yet to be sorted out.

In the meantime, the social differences in modes of communication have been accentuated by the speeding up of some of the traditional forces in American society—industrialization, urbanization (and specialized suburbanization) and the lengthening of schooling for larger proportions of the population. As new groups of workers have invaded the

[3]Large-scale derivative studies are Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor, 1949), E. Bagby Atwood, *A Survey of Verb Forms in the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor, 1953), Kurath and R. I. McDavid, Jr., *The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States* (Ann Arbor, 1961), and Virginia McDavid, *Verb Forms in the North-Central States and Upper Midwest*, diss. (microfilm) U. of Minnesota, 1956. Surveys of American dialects and dialect research are to be found in Chapter 9 of W. Nelson Francis, *The Structure of American English* (New York, 1958) and in Chapter 7, Section 4 of H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (one volume abridged edition, New York, 1963). The parallel between the American situation and the early Hellenic one is presented in André Martinet, *A Functional View of Language* (Oxford, 1962).

[4]Notable are Yakira Frank, *The Speech of New York City* (1948); Allan F. Hubbell, *The Pronunciation of English in New York City: Consonants and Vowels* (New York, 1950); Janet B. Sawyer, *A Dialect Study of San Antonio, Texas: A Bilingual Community* (1957); Robert Ray Howren, *The Speech of Louisville, Kentucky* (1958), David DeCamp, "The Pronunciation of English in San Francisco," *Orbis* 7 (1958), 372-91; 8 (1959), 54-77; Lee Pederson, *The Pronunciation of English in Chicago: Consonants and Vowels* (1964); Juanita V. Williamson, *The Negro Speech of Memphis, Tennessee* (1961), and the forthcoming studies by Gerald Udell (Akron) and Robert Weber (Minneapolis-St. Paul). All of these studies except those by DeCamp and Hubbell have been published by University Microfilms.

metropolitan areas and many city-dwellers have fled to suburbia, a greater proportion of our urban school population has come from the less privileged groups in society. Not only are these groups so large and politically potent that they can no longer be conveniently ignored by the magnates of urban society, but conscience, court decisions, an eye on international repercussions, the increasing demand for skilled technicians in automated industry, and alarm at the growing relief rolls of the unemployable have led to concern with the problems of the underprivileged and consequent reassessment of English programs. Segregated schools and segregated housing patterns are on their way out; but physical juxtaposition does not create integration, and specific attention to the communication problems of the minorities must be a part of any curriculum that aims at providing equivalent educational and economic opportunities for all students. Although the most intense problems, for a variety of historical and cultural reasons, are those of the Negoes of rural Southern background who have congregated in the Black Belts of Northern cities, similar attention must be given the problems of rural whites migrating to cities in their own regions, to rural whites leaving their regions for metropolitan areas elsewhere (notably the rural Southerners—hillbillies, Arkies and Okies),[5] the colonies of foreign-language speakers, the Puerto Ricans and other Latin-Americans,[6] the new urban colonies of American Indians, and such old Asian groups as Chinese and Japanese.

[5]Where "reverse integration" occurs—that is, where whites are admitted to institutions formerly reserved to Negroes—a special variant of this situation sometimes occurs, since the Negroes may be better prepared and use more prestigious speech forms than the incoming whites, particularly if the latter come from the depths of Appalachia.

[6]In the American Southwest, where English speakers have come to dominate areas long held by rural speakers of Spanish, the cultural contact may be especially traumatic for the latter.

A little casual investigation is enough to show that the language problems of these groups bear no resemblance to those of the middle-class White Protestant Gentiles in whose interests our curricula are largely drawn.

Although linguists had noted some years ago that social dialects could create serious educational problems, reactions in the public school systems came tardily, sporadically and—as too often happens—largely without drawing on the systematic evidence already available. It was argued, plausibly, that the classroom teachers had to do something right away; it was not recognized that hasty programs might even compound the problems. Above all, it was not understood that the old item-correcting exercises were particularly fruitless in the face of established systematic habits, and that the notion of changing a whole system of speech and eradicating the old habits would run up against the cruel facts that the intentions of the English teachers would seldom be reinforced by the practices of other teachers, let alone the environment of the playground and the home. As linguists were drawn into these programs, a new emphasis gradually developed: instead of a new dialect, a new mode of communication, being offered as a replacement of the habitual home patterns, it was suggested that it be presented as an alternative mode, expressly suited for the classroom, the department store, the clerical office, and other places where a non-standard variety of speech (and writing) would put a person at a disadvantage; if he chose to use the old mode in the home, on the playground, at camp, or in other relaxed situations, it was to be recognized that such modes, too, have their proper uses. The aim, in other words, was to foster conscious BI-DIALECTALISM, with a great deal of code-switching permitted, just as in bilingual states like Switzerland or Luxemburg children learn at an early age to

switch freely from one language to another, as the situation demands.

In view of the dialect situation in the United States, it is apparent that no single set of materials could work equally well in New York, in Chicago, in St. Louis, and in Memphis, but that each major school system must think in terms of its local problems. Nowhere else, for instance, is there anything like the problem of the Puerto Ricans in New York City; for the Spanish-Americans of the Southwest are of their region if not in its dominant cultural group. However, from discussions of interested research linguists, classroom teachers, and school administrators some common principles seem to be emerging.

1. First of all, a social dialect profile must be developed for the community. For many major cities the Linguistic Atlas archives provide at least a framework, and for some, a fairly detailed body of preliminary evidence. But in each community some supplementary work must be done, to sample more deeply the speech of the underprivileged minorities, to provide more detailed evidence on particular problems, and to offer a body of evidence from which problems as yet uninvestigated may be approached. Where most of the evidence is available in phonetic transcriptions, there must be tapes, especially of free connected discourse, from which scholars may derive evidence on syntax, suprasegmentals, and paralanguage. Ideally, there should be sound films for evaluating kinesics, but up to now even the scholars capable of transcribing and analyzing kinesic data are so few that the added expense of sound films might be hard to justify.

2. The next stage is that of establishing comparisons of the data, to see which features of speech seem to be identified with particular ethnic or social groups.

3. A third stage is to see how the racial and social occurrences of particular linguistic forms coincide with popular conceptions. Here one could envisage a series of instruments by which respondents are asked to evaluate particular utterances on a scale of pleasantness or unpleasantness, and to assign each utterance according to the racial and social group of the speaker. Here is an interesting testing ground for folk beliefs, *e.g.*, that one can "always" identify a Negro voice on the telephone. The correlations between actual usage, popular identification, and emotional evaluations are not known, and until we have evidence we may be neglecting some of the most significant if subtle aspects of communication.

4. Finally, when the correlations have been established, it will be possible to set up a rational teaching program to emphasize those features of speech most strongly disapproved by the dominant culture and most correctly identified as characteristic of an underprivileged minority. Naturally, systematic features have a higher priority than incidental ones; a consistent lack of the third-singular present indicative inflection yielding such forms as *she have, he do, it make,* etc., is much more significant in the picture than the use of *I seen* instead of *I saw.*[7] We are here simply following the advice of

[7]That there are important structural differences between white and Negro speech in some of our metropolitan centers does not mean that we must necessarily postulate either a generalized Aframerican pidgin in the past or a generalized substandard Aframerican *koiné* at present, though one may arise in the future if the fault-lines in our society continue to widen. Both of these are interesting theoretical problems, and the former has been defended eloquently by Beryl Bailey of Columbia University and by William Stewart of the Center for Applied Linguistics. With our current knowledge it is safest to assume that in general the range of variants is the same in Negro and in white speech, though the statistical distribution of variants has been skewed by the American caste system. For a summary, see Raven I. McDavid, Jr., and Virginia McDavid, "The Relationship of the Speech of American Negroes to the Speech of Whites," *American Speech,* 26 (1951) 3-17, now available as one of the Bobbs-Merrill linguistic reprints.

Fries: that any rational teaching program must be based upon an examination of the evidence, and constantly reappraised as new evidence is provided and new situations arise.[8]

One can imagine a variety of situations in which variations on these procedures will be introduced. A few examples may provoke the appraisal of other kinds of social interaction for which special materials would be needed.

1. In a community like Greenville, South Carolina, the integration of the rural and cotton-mill schools into one system came approximately at the time of the Supreme Court decisions on racial segregation. The tradition of cultural isolation in the textile villages has reinforced habits of grammar and pronunciation that set the mill children off from both Negroes and urban whites.

2. In Southern and border communities like Cincinnati, St. Louis, Memphis, and Atlanta, the local whites and Negroes are likely to share the same phonological systems and the same social range of grammatical variations, though the scale is skewed by the traditional caste system of the South. In all of these communities, however, the white working-class is likely to be under constant reinforcement from the Southern uplands, where a different set of phonetic values is found and a somewhat different set of stress- and pitch-patterns. But here phonology is in general less of a problem than grammar.

3. In Akron, basically an Inland Northern community deriving its pronunciation patterns from Western New England by way of Upstate New York, the rubber factories have drawn their basic labor principally from the impoverished farms and coal-mine villages of West Virginia, where strikingly different vowels are heard, as well as many non-standard grammatical forms.

4. In Chicago, Inland Northern in origin but strongly influenced by the Irish and German immigration of the nineteenth-century, the heavy migrations of Deep South Negroes have provided both a striking contrast of phonetic values and one of grammatical details. Hill Southerners have more recently appeared in Chicago to further complicate the dialect patterns, but in nothing like their numbers in Detroit and Cleveland.

5. In New York, striking differences between privileged and proletarian speech have long been recognized. These have been further complicated by heavy migration from Southern and Eastern Europe, by heavy Negro migrations, and most recently by the Puerto Ricans. It may be that the phonetic values of the old elite are no longer emulated by the emerging lower middle class, so that there is a consequent accentuation of class cleavage.[9]

6. Washington has become a predominantly Negro city, with white government workers largely withdrawn to the suburbs. There has been a Negro elite, but its children are so outnumbered by the recent and poorly educated migrants that its speech patterns may disappear within a generation.

In each community the initiative must come locally. But the local groups can be more effective if they exchange information, and if they can draw on a body of experienced consultants who have worked with a variety of dialects. The problem is too grave to be left to fragmentary approaches, and the NCTE and the Center for Applied Linguistics have already

[8] *American English Grammar* (New York, 1940).

[9] The range of variation and the accepted underlying lingustic norms on the New York Lower East Side have been investigated intensively by William Labov of Columbia University and discussed in specific detail at several linguistic gatherings of the past two years. At the last report, however, he had not included in his sampling any representatives of the old line Upper-Upper New York class.

taken steps toward coordination of effort, with more to come.[10]

Nevertheless, identifying the overt stigmata of underprivileged dialects and providing an opportunity to learn a privileged local variety of speech is not going to solve the problems of these minorities by itself. In his *American English Grammar* Fries pointed out that the most striking characteristic of his "Vulgar English" was its impoverishment, in grammatical structure as well as in vocabulary. The social dialectologist is needed, but so are practical rhetoricians who can draw on the resources of all objective grammarians to produce more effective materials for progressively enriching the syntactic experience of the students—something no current materials can do. Along with the experience in the language must come a richer experience in the culture which our language transmits—a more substantial body of content in all academic subjects. And the dominant culture must take positive action both to break down overt and covert barriers against minorities and to understand them as human beings with normal human feelings and aspirations.

And here, too, the dialectologist can make his contribution. He knows that whatever their prestige, all varieties of a language are equally normal in their origins, and are transmitted by normal social and cultural forces. A person who speaks a divergent dialect, one of low prestige, does so not because he is intellectually or morally inferior but because he grew up in an environment where such a form of speech was used. It is the business of American education to provide the speakers of such dialects with alternative modes by which they can secure educational and economic and cultural advantages commensurate with their abilities; it is also the business of American education to provide an understanding of dialectal as well as religious minorities. To provide this understanding the linguist must be willing to work to help educate the public at large, and before that the parents' and citizens' groups who support the schools, but first of all the teachers who first meet the members of the minorities in the lower grades, in a situation that can be either a bane or a blessing.

[10]Problems in social dialects have been discussed at a variety of meetings and conferences, beginning with the Chicago CCCC of 1962. A special conference devoted to the subject was held at Bloomington, Ind., Aug. 3-5, 1964, under the chairmanship of A. L. Davis and the sponsorship of the NCTE and the U. S. Office of Education; the report of this conference will appear early in 1965. A special conference devoted to the Washington situation was convened in New York by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Oct. 11, 1964. Long term cooperation by the Center and the NCTE is envisaged, and may be under way by the time this paper appears.